

Heavy Equipment Operator

Run excavators, dozers, loaders and graders. Paid to move earth to within an inch of where the drawing says it goes.

TYPICAL PAY

\$59,850

a year, full time

PAY RANGE

\$42k to \$101k

starting to experienced

TIME TO QUALIFY

1 to 4 years

after high school

DEMAND

Moderate

job outlook

LICENCE NEEDED

No

anyone can do it

WHERE YOU WORK

Highway jobs, building sites, pits and quarries, pipelines, snow crews

How you get there

- 1 High school diploma** Grade 12
 Math matters more than people expect: grades, slopes and volumes. Get a driver's license the day you can.
- 2 Get on a crew** Months
 Many operators start as construction laborers and move onto machines when someone notices they are careful. Others apply straight into an apprenticeship.
- 3 Registered apprenticeship** 3 to 4 years
 Run by a union local or an employer and registered with the United States Department of Labor. Classroom weeks plus several thousand hours of paid work on real jobs.
- 4 Learn more machines** Ongoing
 Start on a skid steer or a roller, move to excavators, dozers and graders. Fine grading with a blade is the skill people respect.
- 5 Journey-level operator** After your hours
 Full rate, your pick of machines, and the ability to move between contractors and between states.

Pros and cons

- + Paid from day one, with no student debt
- + Strong union pensions and benefits in many areas
- + You can point at a road or a building and say you built that
- Seasonal: layoffs over winter are normal in much of the country
- Early starts, long hours and weather you cannot argue with
- Sitting and vibration wear out backs, hips and hearing

Good to know

An operating engineer is not an engineer

The official occupation title for this job is operating engineer, and it throws people off constantly. It has nothing to do with an engineering degree. The name comes from the era of steam engines, and it stuck...

The crane rule is federal

Running a crane on a construction site is the one machine where the law steps in. Federal rules require the employer to make sure the operator is trained, certified or licensed, and evaluated, and to pay fo...

Optional boosts

Crane certification. Commercial driver's license. Machine control and grade systems. Pipeline and specialty work.

Where these numbers come from

My Next Move: Operating Engineers and Other Construction Equipment Operators (47-2073.00)
 International Union of Operating Engineers
 Apprenticeship.gov, the United States Department of Labor apprenticeship site
 Code of Federal Regulations, Title 29, Section 1926.1427: crane operator certification

Numbers checked September 2026. Pay figures are typical full-time annual amounts in United States dollars, based on Bureau of Labor Statistics wage data and published pay scales. They vary by state, employer and experience. Tuition is for in-state students at public schools unless the card says otherwise. Sources, links and the click-through version: <https://career.help/us/careers/heavy-equipment-operator>



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